

First of all, I would like to thank all the members of this Commission for your sincerer work, and say that it's a great pleasure for me to be here, and to testify during this hearing.

My name is Dennis Christensen. I am a 50-year-old Danish citizen. I am one of Jehovah's Witnesses. I lived in Russia from the year 2000 to 2022, and while there I experienced repeated violations of my religious freedom.

It began in the year 2007 when Russia enacted a new anti-extremism law. Subsequently, they began to ban some of the religious literature produced by Jehovah's Witnesses. Sometimes, the police came unannounced to our meetings and filmed all those who attended. I could not really understand at that time, why they were doing all this... But it soon became clear to me.

In April 2017, as you know, Russia's Supreme Court liquidated all of the legal entities of Jehovah's Witnesses. In its decision, the court asserted that the ruling would not restrict the personal worship of Jehovah's Witnesses but banned only the activity of the legal entities. This did not prove true in practice. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2017, the FSB raided our place of worship in Oryol. There were about 15 from the special forces, with masks and weapons, and 15 in plain clothes. They stopped our meeting, questioned all, and arrested me.

I spent 2 years in a pretrial detention prison, and experienced a lot of injustice. I felt like the goal of the authorities was to torture and break me down, so I would cooperate with the Investigator and plead guilty.

First of all, they didn't allow me to see or call my wife Irina. We were communicating for the first couple of months only by mail. They put me in a small prison cell for 23 hours a day, with only one hours walk in a little yard. I was not able to communicate with my family back in Denmark, and the prison only allowed me to receive and send letters in Russian language.

They put me together with smokers, although I already told them that I am not smoking. In the detention prison there were no hot water and they only allowed us a warm bath once a week. In the wintertime it was very very cold in the prison cell, and I had to sleep with all my close on. I often got sick because of these conditions, and the medical help that we could receive was insufficient.

In pretrial detention, you were no longer a human being, you were a prisoner. And all of the staff assumed I was guilty, why else would I be in prison.

During my court hearings, I really felt, that they were not listening to me or my attorneys. The prosecution used false witnesses, including a planted witness, who was working for the FSB. They told a lot of lies about me and my religion. It was like that they already had made their own decision, well before the court case began. Therefore, I wasn't surprised when I was sentenced to 6 years in prison... just for being one of Jehovah's Witness.

When I came to the prison camp in June 2019, the Vice Director took me to his office and threatened me with punishments, if I didn't stop complaining about the conditions, and if I in any way continued to talk about my faith in this prison camp. The Director of the prison did the same, many times.

According to Russian law 1 day in the pretrial detention prison counts 1.5 times toward my sentence. Thus, when I came to the prison camp, I had effectively completed half of my 6-year sentence, and qualified to apply for early release on parole.

But just after a month, the administration planted a knife in my closet, in an attempt to disqualify me from receiving parole.

Despite that, at my parole hearing, the Judge surprisingly believed in me and my story, and released me on parole, giving me a fine of 400.000 rubles.

This decision made international headlines, but I wasn't released. The prison administration falsely accused me of misconduct and sent me to a punishment cell. There I found out that the Prosecutor's office appealed the decision and demanded a new trial. It's my understanding that the orders came from high above, from Moscow.

To further prevent me from being released on a parole the Administration periodically accused me of misconduct and sent me to punishment cells, even the cells for severe violators. In there I didn't have any contact with the other prisoners, and lost all my opportunities to call my wife and family on phone. I was there for 10 months.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, I was released from the prison, after the end of my 6 years sentence, and deported to Denmark. Of course, it is not possible in short time, to tell about all the injustices that happened in these years.

As you know, my situation isn't unique. Over 370 Jehovah's Witnesses have spent time in prison. Over 120 are still in prison, including 3 of my good friends, Vladimir Melnik, Artur Putinzev and Vladimir Piskarev. For more than two years already, they are in the same pretrial detention prison I was in. They are facing the same charges I did. Due to the conditions I already described, they are struggling with many health problems. I really feel for them, because nothing has changed and the situation in Russia continues to worsen. The Investigator has already threatened them that they would get 6 years of prison, just like me.

I really hope that the Committee could see a picture of constant violation of the religious freedom, deception and gross injustice.

Thank you so much for listening and for your great concern, and I would like to say again, that it's a great honor for me to be here!